

Latin America's upheaval should finally shatter conventional wisdom about the region | The Washington Post

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Instead of detailed analysis, the Washington foreign policy establishment has long been hungry for generalizations about Latin America. Academics call them “heuristics” — quick-and-dirty mental shorthand that can sum up the story line for the region in just a few words.

In the '60s it was Fidel Castro vs. Yankee imperialism. The '80s were the “lost decade” of economic stagnation. In the '90s there was the turn to neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus, followed by the “pink tide” of elected left-wingers in the 2000s.

Yet the shorthand peddlers may have outlived their usefulness. The region is now facing upheavals that resist easy categorization. The regional pendulum that used to swing back and forth between left and right has been chopped down and tossed into the fire. October 2019 may be remembered as the moment when Latin America outran its heuristics.

Last month saw mass protests against pro-Trump and anti-imperialist presidents alike. It saw an abortive uprising over fuel subsidies in Ecuador, the end of Mauricio Macri's neoliberal reforms in Argentina, the continuing refugee exodus and unending political crisis in Venezuela, and the diverging fortunes of equal-but-opposite populists in Mexico and Brazil.

Latin America is angry in a thousand contradictory ways at once. People are protesting against right-wing presidents in Chile and Honduras, a left-wing president in Bolivia and a broadly centrist president in Ecuador. In Panama, dozens of university activists were arrested in raucous protests against a conservative constitutional reform proposal.

So it's a story of mass protests everywhere, then? It's not that either.

In some places, power is being passed across the ideological divide peacefully, after

incumbents have lost hard-fought election campaigns untainted by fraud. Argentina's right-wing president was just voted out of office, while Uruguay's left-wing coalition looks likely to lose power in the runoff scheduled for next month. And Claudia López, a progressive left-wing lesbian, was elected mayor of conservative Bogota over the criticisms of the ruling right-wing party.

So elections still work in Latin America? Not so fast.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales ran for reelection even though he'd reached his term limit. Just as in Honduras in 2017, the government abruptly stopped a vote count that seemed likely to lead to a runoff. When the counting resumed the following day, Morales was declared the winner in the first round. The opposition claimed fraud, and violent protests and counter-protests have gripped the country ever since. All we can say right now is that whoever does end up in the president's chair in La Paz won't be recognized as legitimate by a significant portion of the country.

A recent LAPOP poll shows support for democracy is declining in Peru, Panama and Honduras but growing in Colombia, El Salvador, Brazil and Mexico. Across the region, younger people support democracy less strongly than older people. A quarter of Latin Americans think it's acceptable for the president to shut down Congress and govern without it.

As anger grips people across the region, we can no longer rely on past certainties.

Chile — long the poster boy for rising living standards under broadly capitalists governments of the center-right and the center-left — thought of itself as immune to the region's chronic instability. Last month, coordinated groups of arsonists set Santiago's subway system on fire. The violent fringe doesn't speak for the vast majority of Chileans, but it did spark a broader movement. Since those early violent protests, over a million Chileans hit the streets peacefully to demand better services, economic reforms and a new constitution from their increasingly unpopular conservative president.

Don't try to generalize from that, though. In Brazil, the firebrand far-right President Jair Bolsonaro saw his approval rating collapse to just 30 percent within months of taking office, yet

he stunned Brazil-watchers by passing a pension reform bill (long the “third rail” in any political system) through a Congress he doesn’t control. Brazil has yet to see the massive street mobilizations and protests that have been spreading around the region.

In Ecuador, a center-left government faced mass protests that escalated into a violent attempt at its overthrow. You’re probably thinking: The old right-wing coup is alive and well in the region? Not at all: It was the supporters of a more radical leftist former president that led the charge (former president Rafael Correa denies any personal involvement).

So can we at least say everyone is angry and every incumbent is hated?

Not even that.

Three Latin American leaders retain majority support in the hemisphere — all three outspoken outsiders. Even for them, though, any search for an ideologically coherent story is a fool’s errand.

Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador and El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele were both elected on a promise to toss out the corrupt political leaders of the past. López Obrador is an egomaniacal old-school leftist who wants to return to Mexico’s economic nationalist policies of decades past. Bukele is a onetime member of the left-wing FMLN, but he has allied with the right in his own country and sided with President Trump on a number of foreign policy issues. Peru’s Martín Vizcarra, meanwhile, is a centrist who owes his immense popularity to his move to shut down his corrupt Congress and his promises of a constitutional reform that will cut short his own presidency. Ideologically, the success stories are just as all-over-the-place as the failures.

For decades, Latin Americanists have been ritually repeating that each country in the region is different, that each has its own history, social dynamics, political traditions and cultural idiosyncrasies. For just as long, the rest of Washington’s foreign policy establishment has been ignoring our warnings.

But there’s no simple gloss on the cyclonic forces shaking Latin America right now. The region is angry. Citizens have lost patience with their political systems and they’re looking for politicians

willing to toss out the old system without a clear vision of what comes next. That anger crosses ideological lines, focuses on local policy challenges and has no regard for the old left-right debates of the region's past.